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ABSTRACT

In spring 1987, a study was conducted at Monroe Community College (MCC) to determine the factors which influence attrition and retention, with particular focus on the reasons why students who have not graduated fail to return for succeeding semesters. Questionnaires were mailed to 452 former students, requesting information on students' rankings of the importance of various factors in explaining why they did not return to MCC, their likelihood of returning to MCC, their major reason for attending the college, their rating of their college experience, and their interest in having an academic advisor contact them. Study findings, based on a 39% response rate, included the following: (1) 90% of students reported personal rather than institutional factors as the primary reason for not returning; (2) 85% reported that no intervening college service would have helped them continue their education at MCC; (3) 81% rated their experience at MCC as excellent or good; (4) 78% reported that they either met their educational objectives at MCC or planned to return in order to meet these objectives; (5) differences between the day and evening registrants were evident in their initial objectives; and (6) day students (42%) were twice as likely as evening students (19%) to be attending college or university elsewhere at the time of the survey. The survey instrument is appended. (UCM)

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State University of New York

Monroe Community College

A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

of

NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

John D. Cotnam
Sherrill Ison

January 1988

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INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT DIVISION

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A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

SUMMARY

Ninety percent of the students reported personal rather than institutional factors as the primary reason or influence for non-return.

Eighty-five percent reported that no intervening college service would have helped them continue their education at MCC.

Eighty-one percent rated their experience at MCC as either excellent (26%) or good (54%).

Seventy-eight percent either met their educational objectives at MCC (46%) or planned to return in order to meet their objectives (32%).

Student goals upon initial enrollment were diverse.

- 29% aimed at a degree without future transfer
- 24% were interested in upgrading job skills
- 18% took courses to transfer without a degree
- 15% took courses for personal development or enrichment
- 13% aimed at a degree in order to transfer

Differences between the day and evening registrants were evident in their initial objectives.

- more evening than day students had interest in development/enrichment
- more day than evening students planned to transfer without degree
- more evening than day students pursued job skills
- more day than evening students planned to transfer with a degree

Upon follow-up, day students (42%) were twice as likely as evening students (19%) to be attending college or university elsewhere.

. . . . .

The report is based upon findings and a response rate of 39 percent from a random sample of 453 non-returning students.

I. Introduction and Objectives

As part of Monroe Community College's effort to better understand the factors which influence attrition and retention, in particular the reasons why students who have not graduated fail to return for succeeding semesters - a follow-up study was initiated in spring 87 which focused on fall 1985 enrolled students who did not re-register during the 1986/87 regular academic year.

The specific objectives were to determine:

- Students' reasons for not returning to MCC
- The principle reason for non-returning; whether, in the final analysis it was personal or the result of dissatisfaction with the College (institutional cause)
- Whether the students were enrolled at another college
- The likelihood, as judged by the students, of future anticipated return to MCC
- The students' initial educational objectives at MCC
- Whether these objectives were met at MCC
- Ratings by the students of their MCC experience
- If critical services were not offered,thus contributing to withdrawal from college
- Student interest in being contacted by College personnel for purposes of academic advisement or admissions counseling

II. Methodology

Last year tne research office reported on attrition of students who were enrolled in fall 1985 semester and were no longer enrolled in fall 1986. There were 5189 students in this initial cohort identified as non-returning. This represented an attrition rate (fall to fall) of 51.4% of the potential returnees (after graduates were removed).

It was found that in spring 1987, 438 of these students had returned (8%) therefore reducing in size the non-returning cohort. A 10% random sample of the remaining 4751 non-returning students was drawn, yielding 458 students. Of these, 5 were found to have been incorrectly identified as non-returners due to errors in social security numbers and one changed to senior auditor status, thereby reducing the sample to 453.

The initial fall to fall, non-returning student population is represented as follows:

Returning in spring	438	8%
Did not actually drop (estimated)	52	1%
Non-returnees represented by the sample	4699	91%
	5189	100%

The sample. Questionnaires were mailed to 452 former students (one student was deceased) with the result:

Initial responses		
Answered on first mailing	89	
Deceased	1	
	90	(20%)

Telephone follow-up was attempted for the remaining students who did not complete and return the questionnaire.

Response upon follow-up		
Answered by mail after telephone call	14	
Responded by phone	57	
Partial answers by phone from relatives (non-evaluative questions only)	16	
	87	(19%)
Total usable responses	177	(39%)

The remaining "non-respondents" were distributed as follows:

Not Reached		
Questionnaire returned as undeliverable and no known telephone	33	
Not reached but questionnaire apparently delivered	239	
Reached by phone but refused to answer	4	
	276	(61%0

The 87 responses obtained on follow-up were treated as representative of non-respondents, and their answers were extrapolated to the entire initial non-respondent part of the sample. These were then combined with the 90 initial responses and results used as estimates of population percentages. Results are estimated with 90% confidence to be with + 9% of true population percentages.

Percentages reported from here on are estimates of population descriptors for the 4699 fall 1985 students who did not graduate and were not enrolled in fall 1986 or spring 1987.

III. Findings

A. Self-reported Factors which Students Identify as Explaining, by Levels of Importance, Their Non-return to Monroe Community College.

The most frequently cited reasons for both day and evening students' non-return were

"took a temporary break in studies" and
"met my MCC educational objectives."

Both factors elicited response rates (for the sample in total) of 40% - either as somewhat or very important reasons for non-return. Evening, continuing education students (N = 255) cited these reasons more than day students (N = 165) 44% vs. 35%. Many of the remaining factors also elicited different patterns when day and evening students were compared.

Day students, for example, more often than evening students cited:

leaving college to pursue employment	34.6%
studying at another college	33.5
lost interest in further study	28.1
failure to see a job pay off	24.7
moved too far (a distance)	24.0
could not decide on program major	22.4
dissatisfied with program major	22.0

as factors contributing to their non-return.

Evening students, in contrast, more often than day students cited:

the inability to handle both work and study	28.9%
the inability to handle both family and study	15.1
courses filled, cancelled, or not offered	13.9
employer withdrew support	10.0
health problems	10.0

Factors checked by students as very or somewhat important in explaining their non return to MCC:

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
Took a temporary break in studies	34.6%	44.0%	40.3%
Met my MCC educational objectives	35.3	44.0	40.6
Do not see any job payoff from more college	24.7	27.0	20.0
Decided to pursue employment and leave college	36.6	21.6	27.5
Could not handle combined load of work and study	17.4	28.9	24.4
Could not handle family responsibilities plus study	10.9	15.1	13.5
Family was not behind going to college	8.5	2.3	4.7
Employer withdrew support for education	7.2	10.0	8.9
Lost interest in further study	28.1	14.7	20.0
Academic difficulties	11.3	7.8	9.2
Health problems	6.2	10.0	22.0
Maternity	0.0	6.1	3.8
Could not find child care services	2.2	4.2	3.4
Could not find transportation	3.4	1.5	2.3
Financial problems	24.5	23.9	24.2
Moved too far away from MCC	24.0	5.1	12.5
Studying at another college	33.5	17.7	24.0
Courses were filed, cancelled or not offered	7.9	13.9	11.5
Courses not at convenient times	15.4	15.4	15.4
Could not decide on a program of study	22.0	12.3	16.2
Dissatisfied with program major	22.4	6.5	12.9
No courses of interest	14.0	3.9	7.8
Level of instruction too low	13.0	10.0	11.2
Level of instruction too high	5.6	6.9	6.5
Dissatisfied with quality of instruction	14.6	13.4	13.9
Faculty were disinterested	9.5	8.1	8.6
Could not get academic advising	11.3	4.7	7.2
Could not get career counseling	6.8	5.4	6.0

B. The Primary Reason Given for Not Returning to Monroe Community College

This bottom line question dealt with the students' summative assessment of their reason for withdrawal. The overwhelming majority (90%) gave "personal," rather than institutional, as the major reason influencing their withdrawal.

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
Personal	87.2%	91.7%	90.0%
Institutional	12.8	8.6	10.0

From a consumer satisfaction standpoint, only 10% of the students who elected not to return were in fact dissatisfied or attributed institutional determinants for their withdrawal from the College. Somewhat more day students than evening students shared this view.

C. Subsequent Enrollment at Another College in 1986 or 1987

More than twice as many day students as evening students were found to be attending college elsewhere.

Day Students	Evening Students	Total
41.6%	18.6%	27.4%

With respect to the total cohort - 61.3% of those whose initial goal at MCC was to "take courses for transfer to a four-year college/university but not necessarily to obtain an MCC degree" - actually reported attending another college (see question E).

Similarly - 47.1% of the students with an initial goal of an MCC degree and transfer, were in fact attending elsewhere (before they had graduated.)

D. The Likelihood of Future Re-enrollment

Forty-four percent viewed it as certain or likely that they would register for MCC courses in the future. Another 35% thought it was possible.

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
certain	17.0%	20.9%	19.5%
likely	19.9	26.8	24.4
it's possible	30.9	33.4	34.7
not very likely	13.9	9.7	11.2
no chance	9.4	9.2	9.3

Again, there was a tendency for evening students to view returning to MCC as more likely than day students.

For the entire group of respondents:

Forty percent of those with an initial goal both of earning an MCC degree and then transferring - planned to return with certainty.

Forty-eight percent of those enrolling for enrichment or personal development reasons thought the chance of return was possible.

Fifty-one percent of those with an initial objective of transferring without a degree saw either no chance of return or it being unlikely.

Thirty-seven percent initially seeking to transfer with a degree viewed it as unlikely or definitely not in their plans to return.

Combined responses indicating some degree of possible return - (certain, likely, possible) among the student groups according to their initial educational goals at MCC - show:

Goals at MCC	% Indicating Future Return
enrichment/personal development	95.8%
degree without transfer	95.7
job skills	77.9
transfer with degree	63.0
transfer without degree	49.0

E. Initial Reason or Objective Given by Students for Attending MCC.

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
degree, then transfer	18.1%	9.2%	12.8%
degree, without future transfer	33.8	26.0	28.7
enrolled for courses to transfer, no degree	28.8	12.8	18.4
upgrading job skills	17.8	28.0	24.4
personal development/enrichment	1.5	22.4	14.6

Twenty-nine percent of the day session withdrawal cohort enrolled initially with the idea of "early" transfer without earning a degree. Thus, although it is not possible to generalize to the entire day session population, more than one quarter of those students choosing to not return - registered initially with the intent of an early transfer or application of their earned course credits elsewhere - at another college.

Students with initial goals of job up-grading and those seeking personal development/enrichment were more common in the evening cohort and this degree of goal incidence is probably generalizable to the entire continuing education population.

F. Goal Attainment

Another bottom line question asked the students - "Do you feel you got what you wanted from your MCC experience?" Their responses show that close to half reached goal attainment, but differences between the day and evening registrants were again in evidence. On the negative side, 22% fell short but had no plans to return.

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
Yes, reached objectives	33.2%	52.8%	46.0%
No, fell short	31.9	16.7	22.0
No, plan to return	34.8	30.5	32.0

Forty percent of those with an initial goal of just a degree, without transferring - fell short, while 44.1% plan to return.

Eighty-five percent with enrichment/personal development goals - reached their objectives.

Sixty-two percent seeking course transfer without a degree - reached their objective.

Forty-nine percent initially seeking to transfer with a degree - stated that they now had reached their objectives, while 44.2% plan to return.

G. Students' Rating of Their MCC Experience.

One-fourth rated their MCC student experience as excellent, more than half as good, while only 6.7% responded negatively - (disappointing or seriously deficient).

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
excellent	15.1%	32.4%	26.3%
good	57.7	52.3	54.2
just OK	12.9	12.8	12.8
disappointing	13.5	2.1	6.1
seriously deficient	.8	.4	.6

Viewed in terms of their initial educational objectives upon entry - the personal development/enrichment cohort was most positive (good to excellent ratings) - and the job skill upgrading cohort - the least.

enrichment/development	89.6%
degree/then transfer	86.2
degree/no transfer	83.2
transfer/no degree	75.6
skill upgrading	72.7

H. Students' View of Services Not Found Which Would Have Helped in Continuing Studies

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
Yes, services lacking	18.2%	13.3%	15.0%
No, services not a factor	81.8	86.7	85.0

Educational advisement/counseling led the list of services found lacking, e.g., specific program counseling in the evening, followed by financial aid assistance, lack of advanced course work at extension sites, Rochester Products, and career type counseling generally.

I. Request for Follow-up Advisement

Interestingly, the survey evidenced an interest on the part of students in further advisement/counseling which was not insignificant in magnitude.

	Day Students	Evening Students	Total
Requested contact	22.3%	14.5%	17.2%
Did not request	77.7	85.5	82.8

The names of students requesting that they be contacted have been referred to the Admissions Office.

J. Demographic Profile of Follow-up Sample According to Day/Evening Student Status

RACE/ETHNIC GROUP

	Black	Hispanic	White	Unknown
day students	13.9%	.6%	78.2%	7.3%
evening students	3.5	1.9	83.0	11.6
total sample	7.8	1.4	82.7	8.0

SEX

	Female	Male
day students	45.5%	54.5%
evening students	52.4	47.6
total sample	49.6	50.4

AGE

	< 20	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-59
day students	54.3%	40.4%	2.4%	2.2%	-	-
evening students	10.0	24.4	27.0	16.6	15.5	5.1
total sample	27.4	33.2	17.4	11.0	9.3	3.1

CLASS BY CREDIT HOUR EARNED

	Freshmen 1-30 hrs.	Sophomores > 30 hrs.
day students	64.8%	35.2%
evening students	75.6	24.4
total sample	71.4	28.6

IV. Discussion and Summary

A questionnaire type, follow-up study of students not returning (re-enrolled) during the period fall/spring 1986-87 after assuming an active student status in fall 85, was conducted by mail, and then telephone for non-respondents. Graduates were excluded from the population of 4699 non-returnees - from which a random sample of 453 students was drawn. Responses were obtained from 177 students (39%).

The reasons for leaving college (non-return) cited most frequently by day students were (a) to pursue employment (37%), followed closely by (b) claiming to have achieved their objectives (35%), (c) taking a temporary break in studies (35%), and (d) transfer to another college (34%) (which is related to (b)).

By contrast, evening students cited most frequently and with greater incidence taking a break in studies (44%) and meeting MCC educational objectives (44%) followed at some distance by difficulties encountered in handling both study and work (29%).

Surprisingly, attendance at another college was more commonly identified by day students (34%), than evening students (18%). This was however consistent with their stated objective for initially enrolling at MCC where 29% of the day students and 13% of evening students sought to enroll for courses to transfer without earning an associate degree.

Day students, as might be expected, were more prone to indefiniteness with regard to career/education objectives and a large percentage (28%) left because of lost interest in further study (vs. 15% of evening students), dissatisfaction with program major (23% vs. 7% of evening students), and no courses of interest (14% vs. 4%).

As a result, day students tended to be more critical of academic advising and career counseling services - although not in large numbers (11% vs. 5% of evening students).

Close to one-quarter of all students cited financial problems as contributing to non-return. Financial aid counseling was also among the most commonly identified services which "would have helped" in containing their education at MCC.

In the final analysis, 90% of non-returning students attribute their subsequent lack of enrollment at MCC to personal rather than institutional reasons (or the result of some degree of dissatisfaction). This is consistent with the finding that 46% had reached their objectives - and another 32% with unachieved objectives planned to return (a positive index of 78% counting both categories of response). More evening than day students reported achieving their objectives (53% vs. 33%).

The public policy implications of these figures speak loud and clear that lack of graduation with a degree or simply attrition numbers do not represent institutional failure: rather the opposite. The findings show the College meeting student expectations or objectives, often at the (micro) course level, at a very high level of student satisfaction.

As a group, students identified as registered for personal development or enrichment reasons were the most positive about their MCC experience, but equally tentative or indefinite about their plans to return. This group represented 23% of evening students, but only 15% of all non-returning students.

A recent SUNY report (1987) on "measuring student attrition and retention" refers to the methodological and definitional problems inherent in the topic.

> "Among the latter is the fundamental problem of defining the concept of attrition in an operationally significant manner... The term attrition as it is used within the concept of higher education includes the concept of failure to achieve some goal or objective. It would, consequently, be improper to include within attrition figures a student who entered an undergraduate college and completed only one year of study if that student had no commitment to a program of study leading to a formal degree, or <u>no commitment to a specific goal which was not achieved</u>" (emphasis added).

Most of the non-returning students questioned in this study either met their educational/developmental objectives or planned at a later date to resume their pursuit. A multiplicity of personal reasons were cited for non-return after fall 85 - some transitional and others indicative of goal attainment.

APPENDIX

Write-in Responses

Question A. Other stated reasons for non-return (which were not otherwise cited in explanatory factors).

College dropped "Professional Secretary" designation
admissions counseling services (uncaring, not helpful)
* marriage/maternity
adopted child
* enlisted in military
interested in "major" courses, not general education
poor quality instruction in "major" courses
returned as senior auditor
insufficient time on computer terminals
parents passed away
"allowed" to enroll in course not prepared for
driver education course interest only
secretarial curriculum not up to date
CSEA-LEAP program discontinued at MCC that year
closed out of course at mail registration
avocational interest only, possess degree
disappointed in non-stimulating C.E. courses/teachers

* most frequently cited as "other" reason

Question B. Other colleges in which students were enrolled during 1987.

* Brockport - SUNY
* "Military Service" cited as "another college"
* Rochester Institute of Technology
* University of Rochester
St. John Fisher
Nazareth
Empire State College
Regents External Degree Program
Community College of the Air Force
University of Florida
Oswego - SUNY
Phoenix Institute of Technology
Cornell
University of Maryland
Morrisville - SUNY
Alfred University
University of Buffalo
Purdue
University of California
Union College

Question E. Other - major reason or learning objective for studying at MCC

part of NYS External Degree requirements for R.N.
no clear career or educational goal
interest in one business related course
took chemistry course for U of R - BSN degree
needed mathematics update for college

Question H. Explain - service not found at MCC which would have helped you to continue.

more telecourses
better access to career counseling
career counseling for nurses - e.g., performance under stress, needed to know resources
evening course schedule. Impossible to get to class by 6:30 p.m. Prefer 7:00
ability to "schedule" evening counseling appointments
* financial aid or advisement
should offer Baccalaureate Degree
more structure in courses
* academic counseling
assistance in planning schedule
independent study options (Empire State College model)
advanced courses at Rochester Products
* counseling/advisement for new students and orientation
gay group
psychological counseling

* most frequently cited

State University of New York

Monroe Community College

June 26, 1987

Dear former MCC student:

You were enrolled at MCC in the Fall of 1985 semester and our records indicate that you did not enroll in the Fall or Spring semester this year. Please help us to evaluate our educational services by taking a few minutes to answer the questions (on the back of this letter) about your MCC experience and why you did not return this year.

We value your feedback and will use it to plan for the academic and student services that you (or others) need to complete personal educational objectives. We are interested in your opinions of MCC, what you have done since leaving, and whether you left because you had achieved what you intended or if you encountered some barrier to completion.

Please return the completed questionnaire in the enclosed postage-paid envelope. All responses are confidential and will be released in summary form only. I thank you in advance for your help.

Sincerely,

Sherrill Ison
Manager, Research Services

State University of New York

Monroe Community College

STUDENT FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

A. How important was EACH of the following factors in explaining why you did not return to MCC this year (86/87)? (Circle one for each factor.)

a-Very Important b-Somewhat Important c-Not Important

a b c Took a temporary break in studies
a b c Met my MCC educational objectives
a b c Do not see any job payoff from more college
a b c Decided to pursue employment and leave college
a b c Could not handle combined load of work and study
a b c Could not handle family responsibilities plus study
a b c Family was not behind going to college
a b c Employer withdrew support for education
a b c Lost interest in further study
a b c Academic difficulties
a b c Health problems
a b c Maternity
a b c Could not find child care services
a b c Could not find transportation
a b c Financial problems
a b c Moved too far away from MCC
a b c Studying at another college
a b c Courses were filled, cancelled, or not offered
a b c Courses not at convenient times
a b c Could not decide on a program of study
a b c Dissatisfied with program major
a b c No courses of interest
a b c Level of instruction too low
a b c Level of instruction too high
a b c Dissatisfied with quality of instruction
a b c Faculty were disinterested
a b c Could not get academic advising
a b c Could not get career counseling
a b c Other *(please specify)* _____

_____

B. Would you say the primary reason for your not returning was (Circle one.)

a Personal (already met goals, changed interests, job or family pressures, etc.)
b Institutional (the result of some degree of dissatisfaction with MCC)

C. Did you enroll at another college in 1986 or 1987?

a Yes b No

If yes which college? _____

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D. How likely are you to register for classes at MCC in the future? (Circle one.)

a Certain d Not very likely
b Likely e No chance
c It's possible

E. Which of the following best describes your major reason or learning objective for studying at MCC in Fall 1985. (Circle one.)

a To obtain an MCC degree/certificate and then transfer to a four year college/university
b To obtain an MCC degree/certificate with no definite plans to transfer
c To take courses for transfer to a four year college/university but not necessarily to obtain an MCC degree
d To take courses for purposes of upgrading job skills
e To take courses for personal development and enrichment
f Other *(Please specify)* _____

_____

F. Do you feel you got what you wanted from your MCC experience (Circle one.)

a Yes, I reached my objectives
b No, I fell short of my objectives
c I did not reach my objectives but I plan to return

G. How would you rate your MCC experience? (Circle one.)

a Excellent
b Good
c Just OK
d Disappointing
e Seriously deficient

H. Is there any service you could not find which would have helped you continue your education at MCC?

a Yes b No

If yes, please explain _____

_____

I. Would you like an academic advisor or admissions counselor to contact you?

a Yes b No

Name _____

Telephone _____

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